Aversions, Temporary and Permanent

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by jotc

Summary

While sitting with Mensah's family at the dinner table, Murderbot accidentally touches food and experiences an intense textural aversion. Gurathin shares a similar aversion he experienced from actually eating food, along with some wisdom from Mensah. (Set on Preservation, post Platform Decay, Platform Decay spoilers)

Notes

Originally written for Murderbot Major & Minor Maladies. Prompt: took a bite of something and the texture is wrong.

I don’t eat. At first when I visited Mensah’s home, I didn’t sit at the table either. But after we brought Janity and Tula back, Tula wanted me to sit next to her.

It’s hard to refuse young traumatized humans. And while eating is gross, it’s not like I had to do it myself. All I had to do was sit next to her so she would feel better.

I like it when young humans feel better.

What I didn’t think about is that young humans are also clumsy. I guess I knew that, actually. I’d seen Mensah’s children spill any number of things (mostly but not exclusively glasses of liquid) but I’d always been safely out of the splash zone.

If I’d thought about it, I still wouldn’t have worried. I don’t like to move at SecUnit speeds while sitting near Mensah's family because it startles them. But even if I couldn’t catch whatever dish or glass was threatened in time to prevent a spill, I could just use the family’s perfectly adequate shower after.

So when Tula made one of those improbable jerky movements which young humans are prone to and sent a bowl of something creamy tumbling my way, I was unprepared for my reaction.

That soft, creamy substance contained small semi-solid balls of something. The moment it hit my arm, it felt exactly as if the food was riddled with insect eggs which might at any moment hatch and unleash burrowing parasites on me. Threat assessment considered this an immediate emergency and sent the order to my arm guns to blast this substance out of existence before I and the other humans all became infested.

No, I don’t think this relates to any actual experiences I’ve had. Yes, past contracts did involve various stinging, biting, creeping, and burrowing things but none so menacing that I needed to shoot them.

I managed to abort the arm gun command. Then, while my organics were busy panicking about how close I’d come to firing weapons at Mensah’s family dinner table, threat assessment began yelling at me to at the very least snatch the food away from the hapless humans before they ate it.

All that left me sitting there frozen and useless. Great job me, you can handle raiders but you’ve been rendered inoperable by dessert. Before I’d wrestled command of my systems back, Tula’s face crumpled as if she were about to cry.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, no harm done. There’s plenty, we’ll just clean it up and you can have more.” Farai rose to go deal with both Tula and the mess.

Threat assessment really didn’t want Farai to touch that substance. Never mind that she and the others had already eaten some. But thinking about how the humans had already consumed the food just deepened my panic. I sent out a system: system message, an instinctive prelude to a call for help.

Gurathin, who was also visiting, said ”Oh!” as though just now belatedly realizing the obvious. He grabbed a napkin, pushed back his chair, walked over to me, and scraped the bulk of the food off of my arm and into the napkin.

“Let’s go find you a clean shirt,” he said.

I was fully capable of finding my own clean shirt. I also knew a social rescue when I saw one. Everyone at the table recognized that too. But I needed to get out of here before I upset everyone and this thin thread of plausible deniability was as good as I was likely to get.

I followed Gurathin. He led me to the hygiene room, where I stripped off the offending shirt and cleaned my skin.

“Let me guess, it was insect related,” he asked. He’d had the good grace to keep a straight face until I’d cleaned up, but now he barely held back laughter.

“Yes,” I admitted, torn between sulkiness and gratitude.

“I’d have warned you if I realized. I had that illusion too, but from a completely different food.”

I looked at him curiously. I wouldn’t expect a human to have the same false alarm reaction to a physical sensation as a SecUnit. He grinned and launched into the story without being asked.

Evidently he lived here for a while after he came to Preservation. Detox had scrambled his ability to process sensations through his augments for a bit. And all the food here on Preservation was unfamiliar so he didn’t even have memory to guide him.

One afternoon, Kwado (then age four) had come and looked at him with big eyes. (”You know how they do,” Gurathin had said. I did know. There must be an instinct behind it, one which gets lost when humans reach adulthood. Although Mensah has her own way with eyes. But anyway.) And Kwado had said that no one would come to his tea party.

Gurathin had asked when the tea party was, to which Kwado said, “Over here!” and dragged him to a table.

(”Here” is not a time, I pointed out. “I know!” Gurathin said, laughing even harder. “But what could I do?”)

(What indeed. That’s how they get you, these small humans. Their irrationality does an end run around SecUnit and augmented human defenses.)

Kwado instructed Gurathin on how to play tea party, and it all went quite well until Kwado served snacks.

“He presented me with a bowl of green jiggling,” Gurathin said.

“Green jiggling what?”

“I had no idea! It was terrifying though. Semi-translucent, and in the depths there were these half-visible orange-brown shapes. I ate a bite and the texture contrast wasn’t great. The flavor wasn’t all that either. Still, I was pretty proud of myself until Kwado lectured me. He said it was an imported delicacy and it was rude to pull faces.”

“Was it?”

“An imported delicacy? No, not in the least. That was part of the tea party game. Was it rude to pull faces? Absolutely, and that’s how I found out I’d been horrifically rude at the dinner table ever since my arrival.”

That would have caught me by surprise too. “In the Corporation Rim, people aren’t necessarily expected to enjoy food. They’re just expected to eat it.”

“Exactly! Later Mensah told me not to worry, that the family knew I was having augment issues. She also explained that with so much diversity in agriculture and in cooking, people aren’t expected to eat every type of offered food. You can just say no thank you. I still felt mortified.”

I wanted to feel sympathy, but he was laughing so much that I had to figure it wasn’t a painful memory anymore.

“Where do the parasites come in?”

“While I was attempting to eat a bite properly, Mensah showed up. Kwado offered her the green jiggly. She took the serving scoop but didn’t actually scoop any. She deposited air on her plate, took a fork, ate a bite of air, and expressed her deep appreciation for the taste!”

“You can do that?”

“That’s what I was thinking! I was a little embarrassed so I didn’t want to say that out loud. But she looked at my face and figured it out. She laughed so hard!”

With a quick glance at my face to check my reaction, Gurathin immediately added, “Not in a mean way, you know? It was all so innocent to her. And she told me I didn’t have to eat anything I didn’t want to. It was a lot to absorb and I was a bit shaken up. I think she figured that out, because she asked if I wanted a cracker to clear the taste. I said yes out of reflex, because she was being nice, right?”

I could get that. Sometimes I said yes to things just to show appreciation for my humans.

“The green jiggly was kind of sticky and not quick to dissolve. I must have had some traces of it left in my mouth, because I’d had crackers before and they were fine. But this time, once I bit into it, the cracker fragments just felt like they were wriggling.”

He glanced at my face again and quickly added, “Which they weren’t! There was nothing wrong with the cracker! But I sat there trying not to spit it out, thinking I couldn’t possibly do that in front of a child, and also thinking I was going to be ill if I didn’t get that out of my mouth, because I knew it wasn’t true but I swear I could feel little worms burrowing!”

In the Corporation Rim, you didn't spit out food. Certainly you didn't spit out a guest's food. Even through his laughter I could understand how awful it must have felt in the moment.

"Thankfully Mensah figured out something was wrong and dragged me off to the bathroom. She was so confident about it, Kwado didn't even realize there was a problem."

Gurathin's face sobered. "I was genuinely very upset with myself then. I told Mensah it was all just an illusion and I refused to be one of those people who are given good perfectly good food and won't eat it. That I refused to indulge in that kind of selfish and self-destructive behavior.

"And Mensah got really serious then too. She told me that if I wanted this difficulty with my augments to be temporary, she needed me to do one really important thing."

I hate being given conversational cues but he actually wasn't being an asshole right now. So in the interests of getting along, I supplied the standard prompt, "What was that?"

Except then he didn't answer right away. He closed his eyes, something he tended to do when working in the feed. Maybe he hadn't been prompting me, at least not deliberately. A few seconds later, he sent me links to various research articles on taste aversions.

"She said to stop. She said that intense exposure to something unpleasant can take a temporary aversion and make it permanent, or at least harder to overcome. And in contrast, small amounts of safe exposure can lead to expansion of one's tastes. She said I wasn't the only one on the planet with sensory aversions, that it happens in non-augmented humans too, and they know how to deal with it here. I just needed to tell my doctor. And I don't know if the same research applies to textural aversions unrelated to taste, but I thought you might be interested in the research."

I was interested. Certain things are disgusting and being repulsed by them is only sensible. But I don't want to feel so unable to cope with that repulsion that I freeze up or wrestle with the impulse to take out my arm guns.

"Thank you." (It was just good manners, okay? And he wasn't being an asshole right now. Even if he did keep laughing.)

"Mensah also told me that the whole tea party incident would be funny someday. I didn't believe her at the time. But I guess today is the day."

"Because someone else is doing it worse," I groused.

He smiled at me. "No, SecUnit. Because I know everything's going to be all right."

I wasn't sure what to say to that so I didn't say anything. Gurathin waited while I put on a clean shirt, we rejoined the family, and Tula demanded that I sit by her again. The creamy stuff had been cleared away. I sat down and everyone pretended it was normal. Somehow it wasn't terrible.

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